

Maghi: The Festival Among The Tharus: Celebration of New Year

K.C., Ganga (PhD)*

Abstract

Nepal incorporates diversity of caste, ethnicity, language, social structure, culture and religion, among which Tharus are one of the indigenous groups of the Tarai and inner Tarai region of the country. The study is dedicated to explore the practice and process of celebrating Maghi as Tharus new year. This study has been conducted by employing both exploratory and descriptive research design. The data of the present article are based on published articles and books and on interviews with the elders of the Dangaura Tharus, ritual performers and educated persons of the community. This study represents the distinct socio-cultural structure and ethnic practice of Dangaura Tharu. Indigenous festivals are significant in anthropological research. So it helps to add specific knowledge about Maghi, the indigenous festival of Tharu people. But the central aspect of the celebration of Maghi is in the verge of gradual change. Because those characters which are not suitable for today is going to be abolished and those that are suitable are carried on continuously. Some factors that are core components cannot be changed and it is continuous even though they do not bear any meaning but continue in the respect of their fore ancestors.

Keywords: Maghi, festival, Tharu, festival, process, Guruwa, Mahatau, and practice

Introduction

Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multi religious and multicultural country. It is also said that there is diversity in unity and unity in diversity. Geographically Nepal is divided into three major regions as- Himalayan, mountain and Tarai and various administrative regions. Bhot and Sherpa traditionally inhabit Himalayan region. Mountain region is inhabited by the Bramhan, Chhetri, Newar, Rai, Limbu, Tamang likewise Tarai region is inhabited by the Tharu and other various caste and ethnic groups. Tharus are one of the native people of the Tarai and inner Tarai region of the country.

People of Nepal racially have various origins; Mongoloid, Caucasian, Dravidian and Proto-Australoid. There are many ethnic groups known as *Aadibasi Janajati* (indigenous people) such as *Gurung, Magar, Tamang, Sherpa, Rai, Limbu* and *Thakali* representing Tibeto-Burman Mongoloid groups and known as non-caste and indigenous population, have more egalitarian society. They have been living in high-mountain and mid-hill region of Nepal. The upper caste groups; The Brahmins, the Kshetris and so called low caste groups; the

* Mrs. K.C. is an Associate Professor of Anthropology, Patan Multiple Campus (TU), Patan Dhoka.

Kami, the *Damai* and the *Sarki* representing the Indo-Aryan origin are scattered all over the country east to west. The other two groups' smaller in numbers are Dravidian (*Jhangad*) and Proto-Australoid (*Satar*) people have been living in the plain (*Terai*) region. Cultural diversity is clearly observable in Nepal. On the other hand it is the garden of various caste and ethnic groups (*SabaiJatikoFulbari*). Linguistically, Nepal has two major groups: Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan speaking people. However, the Nepali language has been declared as the official national language although more than 40 languages are spoken in Nepal. Nepal is diverse in terms of culture, language and religion. It has various diverse religious groups; Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Christian. Previously it was the Hindu nation in the world but recently it has been declared as a secular state followed by the Peoples Movement II, 2062 / 63 B.S. (2006 / 07 A.D.).

The ethnic diversity and cultural plurality, followed by ecological variation and hidden ethno history of the nation presents Nepal, like many other multiethnic nations in the world. As noted, there are more than 100 ethnic groups in Nepal and 59 are well organized and registered at the profile of Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (*Nepal AadibasiJanajatiMahasangh*). Most of them have their own language, religion and cultural practices holding their own identity. They have their own typical food habits, festivals, folk dances and folk songs, rites and rituals. Among the above-mentioned 59 indigenous ethnic groups, the Tharus are one of them in Nepal. The Tharus of low land Nepal are a culturally and linguistically diverse people, who only a few generations ago, would not have acknowledged each other as belonging to the same ethnic group. Today the Tharu are actively redefining themselves in Nepal's multi ethnic polity.

The Tharus are one of the most significant ethnic groups of Nepal. Tharu community can be found elsewhere in the southern plain part of the country, known as *Tarai* and northern part of the *Bihar* and *Uttar Pradesh* (north region) of India. Therefore we have to resort to different socio-cultural, mythological, and historical sources to find out how the word 'Tharu' came into existence. Different scholars have expressed different views regarding the origin of the Tharu. Gautam (B.S.2044) declares that, the word Tharu is derived from the root '*Tharwa*' found in the Pre-Paninian Sanskrit Grammars, meaning movement from one place to another and hunting which actually characterizes the people of this ethnic group.

In different literatures from the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Tharu were described as one undifferentiated non-Hindu tribal group, while more recent writers emphasize the differences between the groups to a larger degree. The *RanaTharu*, the *Dangaura*, and the *KathariyaTharus*, etc. are now more often described as regionally separate groups, with their own individual cultural identity. It has been pointed out that the various groups have different languages, religions, cultural features and territories (cf.

McDonaugh, 1984; 1994).

Some scholars regard the Tharus as the descendants of the Lord Buddha and they consider them Mangols who inhabited the land stretching from the Himalayas to the basins of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna in India (Dahit, 2062). He further mentioned that the Tharus had established Sukauragadh as their capital and ruled Dang valley for a long time. Some researchers have come up with the name list of Dangisaran, including other Tharu leaders and Thakuri Kings (Subedi, as cited in Diwasa and Bhattarai(Ed) 2009). These two are very famous myth among the Dangaura Tharus and in Dang. While mentioning the rise and fall of Tharu state of Sukauragadh, Chaudhari (2062 B.S.) has depicted the Tharus as the indigenous people of Asia itself. He has called Dangisaran the forerunner of the Tharus and has also mentioned existence of Magar Dang, Chittar Dang, and upper Dang state provinces. Around the fourteenth century, Ratan Pande, a feudal from the hills, is said to have attacked and captured the Sukaura Tharu state (Diwasa & Bhattarai(Ed), 2009).

Tharus are scattered east to west across the Terai (plain portion) of Nepal including the Uttar Pradesh of India. The Tharus are mostly concentrated in mid-western and far-western Terai regions especially in Banke, Bardiya, Kailali, Kanchanpur and Dang Deukhuri. The present population of the Tharus shown by the census of 2011 is 1,737,470 and 6.6 percent of the total population of Nepal. According to Bista (1996) one of the largest groups of people living in the Tarai is identified by one generic term 'Tharu'. Tharus, live throughout the length of the Tarai, with a slightly heavier concentration in the middle and west. He further writes that the traditional territory of the Tharu is called '*Tharuwan*' or '*Tharuwot*'. It consists of the forested land along the southern base of the Siwalik mountain range and a south a few miles into the Tarai itself. He further writes that the Tharus are probably among the oldest groups to inhabit the Tarai. A great number of the *Tharuwa* are found in small clearings in the middle of the forest itself. Most of the large compact Tharu settlements are found in tropical malarial areas.

The Dangaura Tharus who are traditionally living in the Dang valley, are the main concern of the study. In Nepal, most of the researches have been focused in Hill and mountain region, very few researches have been conducted in Tarai region. Recently, most of the foreigner and native scholars have been conducted their research on Tharu group. But, the most of the researches conducted about their ethnic, social, economic and cultural condition. Most of the scholars have conducted researches on the caste, ethnicity and identity (Subedi and Uprety, 2014) depending on this statement; there is no research on *Maghi* festival, as New Year of all Tharu group. Rajaure (1981), Pyakuryal (1982) McDonaugh (1984), Guneratne (1994, 2002) are the pioneer scholars who had studied in different aspects of Tharu people of different area. But they did not give their specific attention to *Maghi*,

celebrated by Tharu group as their new year. This shows the research gap in the Tharu festival, *Maghi*. So, the following Research questions are raised in this article are

- What is the practice of celebrating *Maghi* festival?
- What are the processes of celebration of *Maghi* Tharu cultural life?

The Tharus, alike the people of many other ethnic groups of Nepal celebrate their indigenous festivals. Ethnic festivals and rituals also cope to help strengthen the degree of ethnicity. Devotion to ethnic festivals and rituals could increase group participation and we-feeling. Conversely, non-adherence to ethnic festivals and rituals might weaken ethnic bondage. The festivals and ceremonies of the Tharus are occasions of community participation and reciprocity that help in maintaining their social order and social solidarity. In brief, the social and cultural functions of rites and rituals enable them to attract the natural forces in their favor and support. Besides, they are supportive in their vindication and power to encounter the natural environment, and these meet their survival needs. This descriptive functionalist analysis of the religion of the Tharus shows similarity with Malinowski's (1948) theory of the social functions of religion, which posits religion as a part of a culture with certain functions for the fulfillment of human needs and for the provision of solutions to certain difficulties and problems. Besides this, the religious beliefs and practices of the Tharus look obviously similar to what Radcliffe-Brown has expressed in regard to religion.

“In all ages men have hoped that by the proper performance of religious actions or observances they would obtain some specific benefit; health and long-life, children to carry on their line, material well-being, success in hunting, rain, the growth of crops and the multiplication of cattle, victory in war, admission of their souls after death to a paradise or inversely, release by the extinction of personality from the round of reincarnation” (Redcliffe-Brown, 1952).

This shows that the entire circle of the Tharu life is dominated by religious beliefs and practices, and faith in supernatural power.

Objective

The overall objective of this study is to describe the *Maghi* festival of Tharu. The specific objectives are to explore the practice of celebration of *Maghi* festival as New Year and find out the processes of celebration of *Maghi* festival as Tharu cultural life.

The present study is devoted to the Dangaura Tharus of Dang District in general and their practice of celebrating *Maghi Parva* as Tharu New Year in particular. The Dangaura Tharu group of Dang valley is very rich in its culture as their language and culture are different from the rest of the Tharus of Nepal and India. Among the Dangaura Tharus of Dang valley have very unique system of cultural practices, which distinguishes them from

others. Originally Dangaura Tharus are the native dwellers of Dang district and widely known as Dangaura Tharu of mid-western Nepal.

Methodology

This study has been conducted by employing both exploratory and descriptive research design. Primary data has been collected through key informant interview, interviews with the elders of the Dangaura Tharus, ritual performers, and *Guruwa* exorcist. Focus group discussion was conducted in 2016. Six persons had participated in the group who discussed the practice and process of celebration of *Maghi* as indigenous practice and ethnic identity of Dangaura Tharu. At the time of focus group discussion (FGD) extensive discussions were held with the participants. The qualitative data was used for the study. The secondary data is based on published articles and books.

For the research Sewar Bansbot village of Dang district was purposively selected. Sewar Bansbot village is situated to the north west of Ghorahi bazaar, two-kilometer distance from Ghorahi, the head quarter of Dang district and one has to go through a crossing river- named Sewar Khola by which, named the village Sewar.

Geographically, this area is entirely low land Tarai region, contains generally the ethnic and caste group like - *Tharu, Bramhan, Kshetri and Magar* and other ethnic groups as well. The study area is well known because of the Tharu's native land. This research focuses on the Tharus of mid-western Nepal, which have lived in happy isolation with their own mythology, customs, beliefs, rituals and lifestyle for centuries. As native dwellers of the area from very beginning they are maintaining more specific and unique ethno-cultural practices, which made them very distinct ethnic group among others. So, it is very potential region for the study.

Results

Processes and Practices of Celebrating *Maghi*

Maghi Parva has great importance among the Tharus of Nepal. The festival of *Maghi* is little different from other Tharu festivals. It is considered new-year day festivals and new fiscal year among the Tharus. Since some years ago government also give a day leave throughout the nation. Yet there is no any religious myth or legend associated with this day.

According to key informant, for the Tharus, traditionally *Maghi* is the time of eating, drinking and celebration and of doing no work at all. Previously, when the *Kamaiya* system was in practice personal servants and agricultural employees of Tharu origin used to get holidays, during this festival. All the annual agreements between landlords and tenants or

masters and servants end at this day and must be renewed during or after the festival, if both sides wish to do so. In the course of the year neither party is supposed to break an agreement made during the *Maghi* festival. These all systems were practiced under the *Kamaiya* (contract labor) system, which is abolished by the Nepal government some years ago. Research participants further told that now days they only celebrate the *Maghi Parva* just for enjoy and as their New Year. The main day of *Maghi* festival falls on the first day of Magh (15, 16 January) according to the Hindu lunar calendar. The festival may last three or four more days- until there is no more *Jad* to drink or pork to eat, and serious work must begin again.

Few days before the *Maghi*, in the month of Poush (beginning of January), some *Jad* is especially prepared from *Anadi* (sticky) rice. At the same time some common *Jad* is also prepared. The day before the main day of festival, families go to catch fish for the festival. The same day, some rice (about 2-10 kilograms, depending upon the size of the family) is soaked in water and pounded in the *Dheki* (local rice holler). From this pounded rice flour *Dhikri* (indigenous rice cake) are made and steamed, for the next day. Before one day of the *Parva* or last day of the Poush month, all households, except the very poor, sacrifice a pig. Those who cannot afford a pig or who do not need the meat of whole pig buy at least some pork from those who have surplus or from the near by market.

The *Guruwa* informed that in the early morning of the main day, all family members take a holy bath in the river or a well and offer some money in the water that is mandatory. Some people go to pilgrimage sites in the vicinity. Couples who have no children or whose children are dead, go on pilgrimage to the Barhakune Daha and Laraina and take a holy bath, and ask boon for children from the deity *Baraha* (third avatar of god Vishnu). Those family members and other peoples who cannot go for the holy bathing, on their way back to the village, a team of amateur Tharu dancers and musicians come to the street to greet returnee from pilgrim site. Moreover, when they arrived at the house, the wife or one of the family members use to wash his feet with a gesture of respect. Then the pilgrim couples give Tika to other people in the house and greet them. After that, some women of the village, generally from the families of paternal cousins, came with food and drinks called *Parchakki* (feast) for the pilgrim couple. Feeding a pilgrim is considered a deed of charity and it also transfers some of the merit of the pilgrimage to the furnisher of such *Parchakki*.

Based on the focus group discussion (FGD), in the every household, when all people come back from their bath, all the males of the house go to the deity room. One, two or three pots (depending upon the number of generations living males in that family) are kept there, in which men of each generation i.e. the grandfather's generation, the son's

generation and the grandson's generation) drop (*Nisrab Kaharna*) handful of black lentil and rice and salt in a separate pot, to be donated to the sister/ sisters of the men of each generation. Each donor has to drop five *Ujrifull* of rice, five single hand-full of whole grain, black grams and the same amount of salt in the allotted pot for his generation then they greet their *Bhutwa* (gods). After the finishing of this ritual, all junior members of the family greet their elders by touching the feet is called *Dhoglagne*. The materials thus collected are delivered within a few days to the sister/sisters (to be divided equally if there is more than one sister).

Key informants stated that after this, all person of the family eats and then goes for one house to another (usually to the house of relatives and friends) to drink more *Jad* (homemade liquor) and eat more pork, pickles and vegetables. Meanwhile long talks and discussions on such occasion generally concern the food especially the *Jad*. Comparisons are made about the taste of food and drinks served during the *Parva* by the various houses, which have been visited. Therefore everyone competes to serve better *Jar* than the others. These feasts last usually for about a week.

Research participants further indicated that, during the mid-day of the main day of the *Parva*, all the *Gardhurryas* (household heads) gathered at the *Mahaton's* (village head) house carrying one *Golrafull* of *Jad*, which they drink there. Next day, they gather again at the same place, with the same amount of *Jad*. This *Jadis* consumed during a *Khel*, in which the *Mahaton* asks each individual *Gardhurrya* about his problems: whether he is moving or migrating to a new place, whether he has any intention of building a new house or renovating an old one, or whether some one in his house, is going to get married. These questions are asked to let the *Mahaton* know what sort of community help at what time will be needed to the concerned *Gardhurrya*, so that he may prepare or fix a rough schedules for such events.

Before the abolition of *Kamaiya* (contract labor) system, during the festival or as soon afterwards, each tenant or farm laborer called *Adherwa* (share cropper) and *Kamaiya* (contract labor) used to go his master to receive *Tika*, as a sign of respect or acceptance of his mastership. A new tenant or new laborer for the coming year also used to go to his new landowner or master to receive *Tika*, as a formal sign of the acceptance of his mastership. But after the abolition of the system by the government level there is no *Kamaiya* system at all. So only share croppers used to go their new and old landlord's home for agreement of share cropping between them.

As reported from the study area, during the *Maghi* week there are several male and female groups of amateur Tharu dancers in special colorful and charming dresses. They

sing, dance and beg for money from one house to another. In this occasion all girls and boys are free. Sometimes it creates some social problems like pregnancy before marriage. But most of the people easily accept the pre marital pregnancy. The Tharu people have an indigenous custom that if a girl is pregnant and if the male did not accept her as his wife, another male easily accepts the pregnant woman as his mate with her foetus. The baby is considered to be his, own and belongs to his clan. The unmarried boys and girls can fall in love so it is the favorable times for select the life partner for them. If the unmarried girls eloped with the boy, the family and society also easily accept them. This is the only community where the women enjoy freedom at least for a week during *Maghi* every year. Money that is collected by *Maghi* dance, they have a custom of feast, called *Chuki*. After or before the *Chuki*, usually one week later, they all return to their regular life. Then *Maghi* is over for a year.

In conclusion, the central aspect of the celebration of *Maghi* is either they follow continuity or change? In this sense, *Maghi's* cultural practice is dynamic as society and culture and it is found that they change as those people or community require can adopt it and it is continuous too. It is impossible that all factors should be changed without change in such practices, but not practically possible. So, it is essential to change these factors as their requirements by themselves. Some factors that are core components cannot be changed and it is continuous even though they do not bear any meaning but continue in the respect of their fore ancestors. As a student of anthropology popular statement of Tylor(1871), "the cultural characters which are not adopt for their environment will be abolished and which are able to subsist will be carried on to the next generation", as true statement because those characters which are not suit for today are going to be abolished and those which are suitable are carried on continuously.

For these changes, it is found that economic factors are one of the key factors among all. Progressively improving economic status of Tharu is the main factor to determine their status in their community. Parallel to it, infrastructural development, and development of Ghorahibazzaras growth axis of mid-western region is also promoting the business and it also indirectly influences the life style and livelihood of people of that particular area. Likewise, rental impacts, market of agricultural products and opportunities of labors and skilled are also promoting economy directly and improving economic status of Tharu indirectly. These factors are also acting for such changes.

Similarly, social factors like, education, communication, networking, awareness, urbanization, modernization are also acting for changes in life style of all people in the study area particularly the Tharu. Like wise, such changes also indirectly or directly impact on the changes of *Maghi* practices. Cultural factors like Sanskritization, identity awareness, ethnic

and cultural identity, belongingness, cultural influences, enculturation, and assimilation are also the key factors for such changes. Inclusive policies and participations are also helping factors for the determination of such changes in Tharu especially the *Maghi*celebration.

Conclusion

MaghiParva has great importance among the Tharus of Dang as well as Nepal. The festival of *Maghi* is little different from other Tharu festivals. It is considered a new-years day of the Tharus. After the change of political system in the country, ethnic identity is being more popular among every ethnic group. Tharu people are not also exception. They are vigorous to identify themselves as an important ethnic group. Every ethnic group is distinct with each other by their own indigenous practice of culture. *Maghi* is becoming more popular in the country. The process and practice of celebrating *Maghi* is very interesting and meaningful. It is considered a very good example of social harmony among the family members, relatives, kin, ethnic social organization (*Mahatau, Gardhurrya*), and villagers. Yet, there is no any religious myth or legend associated with this day. Nepal government also recognizes *Maghi* as national festival. After the political changes in the country, on the occasion of *Maghi*, government also declares a public holiday.

References

- Bista, D. B., (1996). *People of Nepal (sixth Ed.)*. Kathmandu: RatnaPustakBhandar.
- Dahit, G., (2062). *BrihadTharuVyakaran*. Unik Nepal, Bardiya.
- Diwasa, T. & Govind Raj Bhattarai. (2009). (Eds.). "*Tharu Folklore and Folk life*". Nepali Folklore Society. Kathmandu, Nepal.
- Gautam, T. N., (B.S. 2044). *TharuPuran Dang*.
- Guneratne, A., (1994). *The Tharus of Chitwan: Ethnicity, Class and the State in Nepal*". Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Chicago.
- Guneratne, A., (2002). "*Many Tongues, One People*". *The Making of Tharu Identity in Nepal*. Cornell University.
- Malinowski, B., (1948). *Magic, Science, Religion and other Essays*. Glencoe (Illinois): Free Press.
- McDonaugh, Christian E.J., (1984). *The Tharus of Dang: A study of Social Organization, Myth and Ritual in West Nepal*. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Oxford.
- Pyakuryal, K. N., (1982). *Ethnicity and Rural Development; A Sociological Study of Four Tharu Villages*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Michigan State University.
- Rajure, D. P., (1981). "*Tharus Of Dang: The People and the Social Context*". *Kailash* 8 (3-4): 155-82.
- Redcliffe-Brown, A.R., (1952). *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Subedi, M. & Uprety, D., (2014). *The State of Sociology and Anthropology: Teaching and Research in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.
- Tylor, E.B., (1871). From Wikimedia Commons, *Popular Science Monthly* 26 (1884): 145.